

The Homesteads Records Project



In November, 2001, Superintendent Mark Engler of Homestead National Monument of America approached then-Senior Vice Chancellor Richard Edwards of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln about establishing a partnership to preserve and making widely-accessible the filing records of American homesteaders.

His idea was that these records, which are fragile paper records stored in the vaults of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, D.C., could and should be made available to the public and also preserved from accidental or other destruction and deterioration. We agreed to work together on the project and hoped that if, successful, it would make the records available, either in microfilm or digital form, at the Monument's site in Beatrice, NE, at UNL, and possibly elsewhere as well. It was also anticipated that availability of the records would likely result in a dramatic increase in the number of visitors to the Monument, and through increased tourism, it would be a major boost to the economy of Beatrice and southeast Nebraska.

What are the homestead records? Every homestead claimed throughout the life of the Act (it remained in effect until 1986) generated a written record (or file) in Washington. The typical record contains the settler's initial entry filing, copies of tax receipts, various required affidavits, letters, and certificate of final proof; it is estimated that on average each record contains 15 pieces of paper. The record was the official means by which the federal government ensured that the claimant had fulfilled all legal provisions of the law and therefore was eligible to receive a patent (title) to the land. Today, many of these original paper records are stored in the National Archives and Records Administration building in Washington, D.C.

It is important to note that the NARA files apparently do not contain the records relating to *all* homesteaders. There are two notable gaps: (1) with regard to *failed* homesteaders, that is, claimants who filed an initial claim but failed to meet the requirements to prove up (obtain a patent) on their claims, NARA has some records but it is unclear how many; the bulk of those records is apparently kept by the Bureau of Land Management, which maintains records from the (now defunct) General Land Office; and (2) for records relating to *successful* homesteaders, that is, claimants who received patents, some apparently did not make it into NARA's files; this conclusion is suggested by the disparity between other estimates of the total number of successful homesteaders (on the order of 1.6 million) and the actual number of NARA files (821,890). It now appears the Bureau of Land Management may hold some of these "missing" records, but others may lie in NARA regional archives, in local offices, or have been lost.

Why are the homestead records important? These records are irreplaceable documents, the primary data base for the study and understanding of homesteading. The U.S. government eventually turned over to homesteaders 270 million acres (or 285 million, sources differ) in 30 states. Homesteading played a central role in the making of America, and by some estimates there may be as many as 92 million descendants of homesteaders in the world today.

These records are also important because, as many observers, including National Archives personnel, have noted, they are extraordinarily information-rich. They are filled with agricultural, historical, social, demographic, and genealogical information, often containing such information in notations as details about the names and dates of homesteaders' births; the names and dates of birth of children born on a property; naturalization and country of origin information for immigrant homesteaders; details about the locations and monetary values of homes and other buildings constructed on homestead claims; military service information for homesteaders who were veterans; names and dates of deaths that occurred on homesteads; and more. They contain a great deal of historical information about agriculture, including types of crops grown on a property; breeds of animals kept on homesteads; figures on crop yields; locations of fences, barns and irrigation ditches; and more. The fact that they are information-rich means that the records are extremely valuable for many types of historical research as well as for family and genealogical interest.

Initial phase, 2001 to 2006. Project principals Superintendent Mark Engler, UNL Professor of Libraries Katherine Walter, and Richard Edwards traveled to Washington to approach NARA officials about the project and attempt to gain their cooperation. After a series of trips beginning in January 2002 and through other communications, NARA officials gave initial approval, though not without some hesitancy, for a pilot project that would microfilm the records of one land office. We began fundraising to support the effort and developed the technical specifications for the microfilms.

Second phase, 2006-2008. Using the microfilm, we developed a pilot online project called "Homestead Records of the Broken Bow Land Office" to demonstrate how records could be made available digitally and to offer searching capability beyond legal description. During this phase the roughly 1800 homestead files of the Broken Bow (NE) land office were microfilmed and made available to the public at the Monument and to researchers at UNL. We were able to demonstrate to NARA and

the partners the potential of digitization. We came to realize that our initial model for preserving and making accessible the homestead records was seriously flawed:

- we were unable to raise the significant funds needed to scale up the processing of records; after six years' of work, we had only succeeded in microfilming one land office's records.
- we were unable to enlist the full enthusiasm of NARA officials to place this project higher on their priority list.
- we were producing microfilm, rather than digital records, in a world becoming increasingly digital (microfilm is, however, an excellent medium for long-term preservation, perhaps better than digital because it is less subject to technological change of the kind that regularly renders previous digital forms "unreadable").

In short, we needed to develop a different model and find new partners with access to more resources if we wanted to achieve our goal.

Current phase, 2008 to present. In 2008 we created a new informal partnership with five partners:

- Homestead National Monument of America
- the University of Nebraska-Lincoln
- NARA
- Footnote.com, since renamed Fold3, a private for-profit company headquartered in Utah
- Federation of Genealogical Societies, a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, since replaced by FamilySearch, the genealogy research organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a non-profit organization headquartered in Utah.

This partnership set as its goals scanning the homestead records to make digital images which would then become available to the public. Fold3 and Family Search agreed to invest significant resources (especially labor contributed in-kind) to staff the scanning operation. NARA agreed to facilitate the scanning operation by making priority work space available for cameras and scanning staff. Homestead National Monument and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln took responsibility for smaller but not unimportant roles. By agreement, Fold3 and FamilySearch would be allowed to charge fees for public access to the records for an initial 5-year period.

This new partnership has worked extremely well. In August, 2012, we celebrated the scanning of the 1,000,000th image out of an estimated 12-15 million total. It is now anticipated that the scanning of all the remaining Nebraska land offices will be accomplished within 2013. Moreover, scanners are now also beginning to work on land offices in other states.

Family Search and Fold3 are primarily interested in the homestead records as a data base for personal genealogical research. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Homestead National Monument, and NARA also have interest in making the records available in useful form for scholars, historians, and

others who are doing scholarly research. Therefore, in the new partnership these three partners, with Professor Katherine Walter as the lead person, is taking responsibility for indexing the records and adding metadata. One result of this work is to make it possible to aggregate multiple records into a database that is searchable and manipulable by statistical procedures. The scale of this further processing of records cannot be at the scale of the full scanning operation due to resource limitations. But it is expected nonetheless to result in a database that will enormously expand – by several orders of magnitude, at a minimum – the number of homesteader files and information available to researchers.

The Outcome and the Future. It is now possible to see in outline the result of this project:

- At some point all of the documents contained in NARA's 821,890 successful homesteader files will be available on-line in digital form.
- A significant number of these records will be available in a form that is conducive to academic research on the process of homesteading.
- A new history of the homesteading regions of the country will be written based on a much larger, rich, and detailed source of information than has been possible up to the present.